Foundations for Quality Series

Consumer Education Websites

A Guide to Creating a Family-Friendly Experience

Early Childhood
National Centers

NATIONAL CENTER ON
Parent, Family and Community Engagement

Acknowledgments

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Consumer Education Websites: A Guide to Creating a Family-Friendly Experience

Introduction

States, Territories, and Tribes and entities providing consumer education have an opportunity to reach large numbers of diverse families through well-crafted, family-friendly websites that are responsive to the needs of the communities they serve.

Family-friendly websites are:

- easy to understand,
- strengths-based,
- culturally and linguistically responsive, and
- easy to use.

This guide offers research-based information that agencies and organizations can use to create or enhance a family-friendly consumer education website. If you are responsible for developing and posting content yourself or supporting staff who do, you can directly apply this information to your work. If your website is managed by others, or if you work with a vendor to develop and post content, you can apply this information to your plans, requests, and quality improvement efforts. Inside you will find information about:

- how families use websites to search for information about parenting and early childhood and school-age care and education programs,
- features of a family-friendly consumer education website,
- ideas to promote consumer engagement, and
- resources to help you plan and design a family-friendly website.

> ### "Professionals" and "Programs"
>
> In this resource, professional refers to all early childhood and school-age care and education professionals working at the systems or program level.
>
> Program refers to all early childhood and school-age care and education programs.

What We Know About How Families Use Websites to Gather Information

Understandably, families tend to value input from people they trust. Results from a nationally representative survey in 2014 found that among households who reported considering more than one program in their search, nearly two thirds of families (63%) relied on information from family and friends. Just over one third of families (39%) in this survey reported relying on "other" sources of information including websites.[1]

Families want useful, credible information. In a 2016 study, 82 percent of families reported using search engines or websites to find information related to parenting and early childhood and school-age programs. However, trustworthiness of the information is a strong consideration. Less than half of families (47 percent) rated the information they find as being useful. Fifty-eight percent of parents said that the overwhelming amount of information available makes it difficult to trust the quality of the information. Uncertainty about the credibility of the source can also be a challenge. Fifty-four percent of families reported wanting information from a website or blog lead by child development experts.[2]

Features of a Family-Friendly Website: Easy to Understand

Use Plain Language to Make It Easier for Readers to Understand the Information on Your Website

Consult the Federal Plain Language Guidelines to inform your efforts to help families:

- find what they need,
- understand what they find, and
- use what they find to meet their needs.

Section 98.33 of the 2016 Child Care and Development Fund Final Rule Requirement

Section 98.33 of the 2016 Child Care and Development Fund Final Rule requires Lead Agencies "to collect and disseminate consumer education information to parents of eligible children, the general public, and providers through a consumer-friendly and easily accessible website."*

To highlight families as consumers, we use the term "family-friendly website" throughout this document.

See pages 17 for a summary of consumer education requirements in the Final Rule.

You can find more information about CCDF Reauthorization and the Final Rule at https://www.acf.hhs.gov/occ/ccdf-reauthorization.

You can find additional information including a self-assessment aligned with CCDF consumer education website requirements and additional best practice considerations at the CCTA website at https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/.

*Tribes are exempt from the requirement for a consumer education website. Learn more at https://www.acf.hhs.gov/occ/resource/ccdf-final-rule-tribal-fact-sheet

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[1] Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation. (2014.) Household Search for and Perceptions of Early Care and Education: Initial Findings from the National Survey of Early Care and Education. (*Nationally representative survey of 11,629 households with at least one child under age 13 across 755 communities in all 50 states plus the District of Columbia.*)

[2] ZERO TO THREE. (2016.) Tuning In: National Parent Survey Overview. (*Nationally representative sample of 2,200 parents of children birth to 5 years. Survey made available in Spanish and English.*)

The Plain Language Guidelines cover thinking about the reader, organizing content, writing principles and testing techniques. The tips and strategies below are based on Plain Language guidance. See the Federal Plain Language Guidelines for a complete set of recommendations. Use the link provided in the Additional Resources section of this document.

Be concise

- Keep sentences short and direct.
- Use short, simple, familiar words.
- Omit unnecessary words. For example, "There are many factors to consider when choosing a child care provider" is more concise than, "At this point in time, there are a number of different factors to consider when choosing a child care provider."

Be clear

- Keep paragraphs short and limited to one idea.
- Use terms consistently. For example, don't switch back and forth between child care provider, early educator, and caregiver.
- Avoid jargon. For example, when describing learning environments, say "Look for small toys, such as nesting cups, puzzles, and interlocking blocks. These kinds of toys can help your child build hand-eye coordination and coordination of the small muscles in their hands and fingers." Don't say, "Look for a variety of manipulatives to support fine motor development."
- Distinguish requirements from recommendations. Use "should" to indicate a best practice. Use "must" to indicate a requirement. For example, "Daily schedules for infants and toddlers must include time outdoors" and "Infants and toddlers should have daily opportunities for active outdoor play such as crawling, walking, and running."

Write as you would speak

- Use simple, present tense, action verbs. For example, say, "Use these questions when interviewing a child care provider." Don't say, "These questions may be used when interviewing a child care provider."

- Use pronouns to speak directly to readers. For example, say, "You must provide a copy of your child's immunization records." Don't say, "A copy of your child's immunization records must be provided."

> **About Plain Language**
>
> Keep in mind that a language style that is plain to one set of readers may not be plain to others. It is important to understand your audience and be responsive to their cultures and languages.

- Use contractions where they sound natural. For example, an FAQ might read, "I'm worried about my child's development. Who should I call?"

Plain Language Guidelines offer special considerations when writing for the web. Review all of these considerations.

Organize website content so families can find information easily	• Arrange content into sections with clear headings and use bulleted lists for key facts.
	• Limit the number of words on each web page to 110 words or less. When translating print documents for web use, content typically needs to be reduced by 50 percent.

	• Clearly and simply convey specific tasks families can complete on the website. For example:
	  o Find help paying for child care
	  o Apply for help to pay for child care
	  o Search for child care near your home or work
	  o Print a checklist to use when interviewing programs and program staff
	  o Find out what do if you think your child might have a developmental delay

	• Minimize the use of downloadable PDFs. When a downloadable PDF is the only viable option, the website should explain the purpose of the PDF, the size of the file, and who might find the document helpful.

Consider Literacy and Reading Level

A large, nationally representative study indicates that 82 percent of American adults have ample literacy knowledge and skills needed to search, compare, contrast, and integrate information from print and digital text. These tasks are more complicated for the nearly one-fifth of American adults whose literacy knowledge and skills are limited to recognizing and understanding simple words, sentences and paragraphs.[3]

Eighth grade level is widely accepted for information meant for the general public. For easier reading, aim for sixth grade level when developing content for parents.[4] The Flesch-Kincaid readability test can be useful in measuring the grade-level of your content. You may find this readability test in your word processing software. You can use plain language strategies to help lower the reading level. For example, try shorter sentences and words with fewer syllables.

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[3] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), 2012 and 2014.

[4] ECLKC. (2017). Website and Communication Standards: Plain Language. Retrieved from https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/web-standards/_federalrequirements/plain-language.html

Features of a Family-Friendly Website: Strengths-based

Convey Strengths-based Attitudes in Your Website Content to Encourage Positive Relationships With Families

Examples of strengths-based attitudes to convey to families in all your interactions, whether web-based or in person include:

- All children and families have strengths.
- Families are the first and most important teachers of their children. Families are the one constant in children's lives, and children's healthy development relies on sensitive and nurturing interactions within the family and the community.
- Families are our partners with a critical role in their family's development.
- Families make choices every day that affect a child's development and learning. These choices are rooted in their belief systems and cultural identity.
- Families have expertise about their child and their family. Families understand their children best and can make decisions for their children's well-being. When families share what they know, children, families, and providers benefit.
- Families' contributions are important and valuable. Being open to their suggestions and requests helps us do our best on behalf of their child.

The following statements are examples of how strengths-based attitudes can be translated into key messages and action steps. Consider using these statements or your own similar statements in the text, headings, graphics, and downloadable or printable materials on many of your web pages:

- You are your child's first and most important teacher. As you search for child care, consider which program best matches your family's and child's approach to learning.
- You have a critical role in your family's development. Talk with your child care provider about your family's needs and goals.
- You are the expert on your child and family. Look for a child care provider who asks for and respects your input.
- As your child's first teacher and decision-maker, your input is important and valuable. Work with your child care provider to find ways that, together, you can support your child's learning in child care and at home.

Use *People-first Language* to Convey Child and Family Strengths

People-first language acknowledges the individual before the situation they may be experiencing. When you use people-first language, you describe a person's circumstance and avoid defining them by it.

For example:

- Label a heading, "Resources for Families Experiencing Homelessness" instead of "Resources for Homeless Families"
- Say "CCDF is a federal program that assists families with low incomes in obtaining care…" instead of explaining that "CCDF is a federal program that assists low-income families in obtaining child care so that they can work or attend school."
- Refer to "programs for children with special needs" rather than referencing "programs for special needs children."

Features of a Family-Friendly Website: Culturally and Linguistically Responsive

Develop Content that Recognizes, Affirms, and Showcases Families' Diverse Cultures, Knowledge and Experiences

Your consumer education website can be the first place where you can help families feel welcome. It can also mitigate and prevent disparities related to access to information about early childhood, school-age, and comprehensive services.

Each family in the community you serve has a unique set of beliefs, values and priorities that should be respected and taken into account when developing web content. Key issues including education, family roles, caregiving practices, even what determines acceptable child behavior and school readiness are all strongly influenced by a family's culture. The cultural beliefs of families directly inform decisions made about their children.

Some tips for developing content that is culturally and linguistically responsive are:

- Choose visual images that will encourage all families to feel included. Consider including pictures of children and families served by your organization (with written permission) that depict diverse cultures.
- Describe your organization's efforts to be inclusive and serve diverse families.
- Consider highlighting the cultures and languages (English and other languages) represented by your staff.
- Consider race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, language, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, and family composition when making decisions about visual, audio, and written content.

> **Interpretation and Translation**
>
> "Interpretation" refers to spoken language. For example, recorded audio tracks on a website that are available in multiple languages are considered interpretations of the content.
>
> "Translation" refers to text. Downloadable forms available in multiple languages are considered translations. Using subtitles on a video clip is another example of translation.

- Include representatives of diverse populations from your community to field-test or co-construct potential website materials.
- Perform a rigorous quality review process for all written translations. Consider aspects such as spelling, grammar, punctuation, plain language, clarity, and cultural context.
- Perform a quality review for recorded audio interpretations.

Features of a Family-Friendly Website: Easy to Use

Make your website easy to use by helping families find it and by creating content that is easy to see and use.

Help Families Find Your Website

- Use keyword metatags to ensure that your website appears in the top 30 options from search engines (Metatags are snippets that summarize a web page's content before visitors click on the page.)
- Consider search terms a parent might use (e.g., babysitter, daycare, help paying for daycare, preschool, vouchers) and embed these terms in the metatag code.

Make Your Content Easy to See

- Use a 12-point or larger Verdana or Arial font for standard text and links. For headings, you can use Serif fonts if desired for design purposes.
- Use text, not images for links.
- Use black or other dark text on a white or off-white background when presenting text information including headers, captions.
- Include a site map families can refer to see all of your website's pages at a glance.

508 Compliance

There are special considerations for individuals with disabilities.

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended (29 U.S.C. 794d) requires that individuals with disabilities, who seek information or services from a Federal agency, have access to and use of information and data that is comparable to that provided to the public who are not individuals with disabilities.

For more information on 508 compliance visit: https://www.hhs.gov/web/section-508/index.html

Make Your Content Easy to Use

- Organize information so that any piece of information can be found in no more than three "clicks" or navigation steps.
- Simplify navigation from page to page with "Previous", "Next" and "Home" buttons.
- Make sure that all of the information on the Home page can be seen without having to scroll up and down or side to side.
- Include an internal "Search" function families can use to find information on your site by entering key words.
- Provide "print-friendly" options to print content and forms.

- Acknowledge user submissions (e.g., applications, questions, comments) with an automated response that includes a thank-you and next steps.

- Avoid empty, "under construction", "coming soon", and "page not found" pages.

Tips to Make Your Website Easy to Use and to Encourage Families' Trust in the Information on Your Website:

- Ensure the site is up to date.

- Provide FAQs and answers.

- Ensure the site looks professionally designed.

- Ensure the site is arranged in a logical way.

- Ensure your site is frequently linked to by other credible websites families may trust.

- Avoid use of apps or plug-ins that must be downloaded before families can enter the website.

- Provide links to credible outside sources and materials. Include links to services that families may already know of and trust (e.g. Head Start, Early Head Start, community action agencies, local school districts).

Promoting Consumer Engagement

Encourage Two-way Communication and Exchanges of Information With Families to Enhance your Consumer Education Efforts

These two-way interactions are referred to as consumer engagement. Consumer engagement describes how families and professionals can work together to promote informed decision-making and drive quality improvement and equitable access to high-quality programs.

Think About Ways to Engage Families in the Process of Developing and Refining Your Website

Focus groups, surveys, and town halls are some ways you can collect information from and share information with families. Ask what information they most need to find. Using their own ideas or sample search scenarios, provide families with opportunities to use the website and rate how easy it was to find what they were looking for. How clear is the information? What are their overall impressions? What ideas do they have to improve the website?

Including Opportunities for Two-way Interactions Within Your Consumer Education Website is Another Way You Can Engage Families

For example, you can embed chat features, user surveys, or a simple "contact us" portal on different web pages. Provide multiple features for parent feedback as families will have different preferences for how they wish to communicate about their experiences on your site.

Learn More About Consumer Engagement and strategies for engaging families by visiting the CCTA web page (https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/).

See the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement's "Consumer Engagement: An Orientation for Early Childhood and School-Age Care and Education Professionals" and "Consumer Engagement: Strategies for Engaging Families".

Consumer Education Websites: Creating a Family-Friendly Experience Assessment Tool

Use this Assessment Tool to support your efforts to create a family-friendly consumer education website. Use this tool along with the tips and resources referenced throughout the "Consumer Education Websites: A Guide to Creating a Family-Friendly Experience" to address the unique needs of your website review. This tool is meant to enhance your use of the guide—not as a replacement. We encourage you to review the guide and the assessment tool together.

General/Overall			
Checklist	**Status** Yes, No, or In Progress	**Next Steps** What do you need to enhance or accomplish in the near future?	**Comments** Highlight progress made, supportive documentation, or any other important information you want to consider.
Pages are clean and simple with a moderate amount of white space			
Written at a sixth to eighth grade reading level			
Strengths-based and oriented toward consumer engagement			
Culturally and linguistically responsive			
Provides FAQs and answers			
Arranged in a logical way			

Consumer Education Websites: Creating a Family-Friendly Experience Assessment Tool, cont.

General/Overall, cont.			
Checklist	**Status** Yes, No, or In Progress	**Next Steps** What do you need to enhance or accomplish in the near future?	**Comments** Highlight progress made, supportive documentation, or any other important information you want to consider.
Looks professionally designed			
Kept up-to-date			
Uses a 12-point or larger Verdana or Arial font for standard text and links			
Uses black or other dark text on a white or off-white background when presenting text information including headers, captions			
Uses keyword metatags to ensure the website appears in the top 30 options from search engines			

Consumer Education Websites: A Guide to Creating a Family-Friendly Experience

Consumer Education Websites: Creating a Family-Friendly Experience Assessment Tool, cont.

Easy to Understand			
Checklist	**Status** Yes, No, or In Progress	**Next Steps** What do you need to enhance or accomplish in the near future?	**Comments** Highlight progress made, supportive documentation, or any other important information you want to consider.
Written in Plain Language			
Keeps sentences short			
Uses short, simple, familiar words			
Omits unnecessary words			
Keeps paragraphs short and limited to one idea			
Uses terms consistently			
Avoids jargon			
Distinguishes requirements from recommendations			
Uses simple, present tense, action verbs			
Uses "you" to speak to readers			

Consumer Education Websites: Creating a Family-Friendly Experience Assessment Tool, cont.

Easy to Understand, cont.

Checklist	Status Yes, No, or In Progress	Next Steps What do you need to enhance or accomplish in the near future?	Comments Highlight progress made, supportive documentation, or any other important information you want to consider.
Easy to Read			
Organizes content into sections with clear headings and uses bulleted lists for key facts			
Limits the number of words on each page to 110 words or less			
Clearly and simply conveys tasks families can complete on the website			
Keeps downloadable PDFs to a minimum (When a downloadable PDF is the only viable option, the website explains the purpose of the PDF, the size of the file, and who might find the document helpful)			

Strengths-based

Checklist	Status Yes, No, or In Progress	Next Steps What do you need to enhance or accomplish in the near future?	Comments Highlight progress made, supportive documentation, or any other important information you want to consider.
Incorporates key messages focused on family strengths			

People-first Language

Checklist	Status Yes, No, or In Progress	Next Steps What do you need to enhance or accomplish in the near future?	Comments Highlight progress made, supportive documentation, or any other important information you want to consider.
Uses people-first language in headings, tabs, and throughout all content			

Consumer Education Websites: Creating a Family-Friendly Experience Assessment Tool, cont.

Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness			
Checklist	**Status** Yes, No, or In Progress	**Next Steps** What do you need to enhance or accomplish in the near future?	**Comments** Highlight progress made, supportive documentation, or any other important information you want to consider.
Visual images encourage all families to feel included			
Website describes your organization's efforts to be inclusive (as applicable)			
Highlights the cultures and languages represented by your staff (as applicable)			
Visual, audio, and written content considers race, ethnicity, socio-economic class, language, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, and family composition			
Website content is field-tested or co-constructed with representatives of diverse populations served			
Translations undergo a rigorous quality review process			
Interpretations undergo a rigorous quality review			

Consumer Education Websites: Creating a Family-Friendly Experience Assessment Tool, cont.

Easy to Use			
Checklist	**Status** Yes, No, or In Progress	**Next Steps** What do you need to enhance or accomplish in the near future?	**Comments** Highlight progress made, supportive documentation, or any other important information you want to consider.
Uses text, not images for links			
Includes a site map			
Information is organized so that any piece of information can be found in three or fewer "clicks"			
"Previous", "Next" and "Home" buttons are used to simplify navigation from page to page			
All information on the Home page can be seen without having to scroll the page			
Includes an internal "Search" function			
Provides "print-friendly" options to print content and forms			
Acknowledges user submissions (e.g., applications, questions, comments) with an automated response that includes a thank-you and next steps			
Avoids empty, "under construction," or "coming soon" pages			
Avoids apps and plug-ins that must be downloaded before users can enter the website			

Consumer Education Websites: Creating a Family-Friendly Experience Assessment Tool, cont.

Easy to Use, cont.			
Checklist	**Status** Yes, No, or In Progress	**Next Steps** What do you need to enhance or accomplish in the near future?	**Comments** Highlight progress made, supportive documentation, or any other important information you want to consider.
Includes links to credible outside resources			
Ensures that your website is frequently linked to by other credible sites			

Notes:

For more information about this resource, please contact us at the National Center for Parent, Family, and Community Engagement.
PFCE@ecetta.info | 1-866-763-6481

Additional Resources

Building Partnerships: Guide to Developing Relationships with Families (National Center on Parent Family Community Engagement)
https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/building-partnerships-developing-relationships-families.pdf

State and Territory Child Care Consumer Education Websites Self-Assessment Checklist (State Capacity Building Center)
https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/state-and-territory-child-care-consumer-education-website-self-assessment-checklist

Coming Soon to CCTA (https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/)

Consumer Education Toolkit (National Center After School and Summer Enrichment)

Consumer Engagement: Strategies for Engaging Families (National Center on Parent Family Community Engagement)

Consumer Engagement: An Orientation for Early Childhood and School-Age Care and Education Professionals (National Center on Parent Family Community Engagement)

References

Federal Plain Language Guidelines
https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/

Health and Human Services Research-Based Web Design and Usability Guidelines
https:\www.usability.gov\sites\default\files\documents\guidelines_book.pdf

Health and Human Services Web Standards
https://webstandards.hhs.gov/standards/

Household Search for and Perceptions of Early Care and Education: Initial Findings from the National Survey of Early Care and Education
https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/brief_hh_search_and_perceptions_to_opre_10022014.pdf

Tuning In: National Parent Survey Overview
https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1424-national-parent-survey-overview-and-key-insights

Appendix: Summary of CCDF Requirements for Consumer Education

The 2014 Child Care and Development Block Grant Act (CCDBG) Reauthorization and the 2016 CCDF Final Rule require States, Territories, and Tribes to provide information to the public about choosing child care. The final rule requires States and Territories (Tribes are exempt) to establish a consumer-friendly and easily accessible consumer education website with specific components, including the following:

1. Lead Agency policies and procedures, including those for licensing child care providers, conducting background checks, and monitoring and inspecting child care providers; and the offenses that prevent individuals and entities from serving as child care providers,

2. Information on the availability of child care providers,

3. The quality of child care providers,

4. Provider-specific monitoring and inspection reports,

5. The aggregate number of deaths, serious injuries, and instances of substantiated child abuse in child care settings each year,

6. Referrals to local child care resource and referral organizations, and

7. Directions on how parents can contact the Lead Agency or its designee and other programs to better understand information on the website.

States, Territories, and Tribes (with Large and Medium CCDF allocations) are also required to provide additional consumer education to eligible parents, the general public, and, where applicable, child care providers. Consumer education may be accomplished through child care resource and referral organizations or other means as determined by the Lead Agency, and can be delivered through the required consumer education website. Required consumer education topics include the following:

- the availability of child care services provided through CCDF (and, if feasible, other child care services and programs provided in the state), and the availability of financial assistance to obtain child care services;

- information on other programs for which families receiving CCDF services may be eligible, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); Head Start and Early Head Start; Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP); Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Women, Infants, and Children Food and Nutrition Service (WIC); Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP); and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP);

- information about programs for children with disabilities carried out under Part B Section 619 and Part C of IDEA;

- research and best practices concerning children's development, including social-emotional development, early childhood development, family engagement, and physical health and development (particularly healthy eating and physical activity); and

- State policies regarding the social-emotional and behavioral health of children, which may include positive behavioral intervention and support models for children birth to school age or models that are age appropriate, and policies to prevent the suspension and expulsion of children birth to age 5 in child care and other early childhood programs.

States and Territories must also provide parents with information on developmental screenings as part of the intake process for families receiving child care subsidies. This information must also be shared with child care providers through training and/or education. Required topics include:

- information on existing resources and services the state can make available in conducting developmental screenings including referrals to services for children receiving child care subsidies, including the coordinated use of the Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment program under the Medicaid program, and developmental screening services available under the IDEA and

- a description of how a family or eligible child care provider may use the resources and services provided under Medicaid and IDEA to obtain developmental screenings for children receiving child care subsidies who may be at risk for cognitive or other developmental delays, which may include social, emotional, physical, or linguistic delays.

The list above is an abbreviated summary of the CCDF requirements for consumer education. The requirements are presented in their entirety in the CCDF Final Rule at 98.33 (45 CFR 98, 2016). These requirements ensure that States, Territories, and Tribes make information about certain topics available to families. Information about the CCDBG Act and the CCDF Final Rule is available at https://www.acf.hhs.gov/occ/ccdf-reauthorization, or you may contact the Office of Child Care, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, by phone at 202-690-6782.